

A MODERN PIONEER.

Aviation and radio communication have meant so much to the comfort and security of the outback, that we feel it is fitting to pay a tribute to one who did much for both mediums.

Fredrick William Stevens, M.B.E., died recently at his home in Victoria. The son of a lighthouse keeper, he received part of his education at the half-time school at Blacks Camp Junction. His first job was as a telegraph messenger and perhaps it was from this that his interest in communications began. He enlisted in the R.A.N. in 1915 and saw service in many areas. He was in Papua when the war ended and remained there until 1920 when he returned to Victoria. Two years later he was one of three men stationed on Willis Island Met. Station. North Queensland has known the value of this particular service. 1923 saw the birth of the broadcasting era and Mr. Stevens moved from the dot-dash-dot of wireless to the new field of radio transmission. He was with the first 2F.C. Sydney, the first 3LO Melbourne and was Chief Engineer and Deputy Manager of the first 4QG Brisbane. Those who remember these early days of radio, will recall how, when the land line for some outside broadcast broke down (and it usually did) the studio staff would keep the station open with an impromptu programme. One of the highlights was when the Engineer left his control room and came to the mike to relate his adventures on Willis Is., in the Navy or as a boy on the lighthouse. Most listeners were sorry when the normal programme resumed, the impromptu one had been so interesting. Looking for fresh fields, Mr. Stevens became interested in aviation and in 1934 obtained a commercial pilot's licence, a first class flight radio operator's licence and a navigator's licence. He was a crew member of the first official airmail to fly from Australia to Singapore and return. Later he became the first Radio Inspector of the Civil Aviation Board. Twenty-three years after he entered the public service as a messenger he returned in 1940 to the new Department of Aviation. During the second World War he saw service again with the R.A.A.F. ferrying Catalinas to Aust. and as a staff officer in Allied Headquarters. During his time with 4QG he flew with Lester Brain in search of Hitchcock and Anderson, fitting up a radio transmission set which

kept the plane in constant touch with 4QG. He accompanied Brain again on the record smashing flight, for a commercial plane, from Sydney to Melbourne, in the fantastic time of 4 hours and 10 minutes, beating Keith Anderson's time by 10 minutes.

Fred Stevens retired in 1963 after a working life full of drama and adventure. He saw, and was concerned in, some of the most drastic changes in communications the world had yet seen, from Morse Code to television.

The old pioneers ventured into the unknown in bullock wagons, on horseback and in drays, facing the hardships with courage and fortitude. The modern counterparts went aloft in ridiculous contraptions which mainly proved the theory that what goes up, must come down. But they kept going, staying aloft a little longer, travelling a little faster each time, until now a doctor may reach a sick child or an injured stockman in a matter of hours. They sat for hours with headphones clamped to their head, assaulting their ears with fiendish catawauling, crackling and whistling, and counted the time well spent if they could distinguish a human voice through the din. They soldered wires, took bits out and put bits in and talked the jargon of their time, most of it already obsolete. But because of them, a woman may call for help, or a lonely child receive the companionship of vocal contact with the outside world. They had the true pioneering spirit, difficulties were overcome promptly, the impossible took a little longer. In this tribute to Fred Stevens we honour also all those "Magnificent Men with their Flying Machines and Wireless Sets" whose contribution to the welfare of Australians can never be measured.